

Climate Change and West Central Missouri Gardening
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Experienced West Central Missouri Gardeners, and those elsewhere, understand and appreciate how intimately intertwined their gardening activities are with their local climate. What we grow and don't grow out of doors usually depends on the existing prevailing climate, its ecosystem, and our preferences and abilities. According to the most recent USDA pronouncement Johnson County(s), Missouri and Kansas, is now smack dab in the near middle of Zone 6a. Our climate has changed and what may grow in our gardens has too. Until recently we were in growing Zone 5b. Several years ago the National Arbor Society and others were saying that growing zones should be adjusted in accordance with climate change. Johnson County was getting warmer, most of the time. Now, and according to the USDA Zone 6a, the annual extreme minimum temperature reaches -10 to -5 degrees. USDA defines not on heat but rather annual minimum cold temperatures. This and much more climate information is available on the USDA web site. While gardening is our primary interest it might be a bit remiss not to comment some about climate change itself. I read somewhere that you had to be in a cave or under a rock to not perceive our changing climate. This may be a little harsh and even disrespectful of alternative views, but the data supporting climate change is both overwhelming and impressive. Climate change is not a recent phenomenon, it has been going on a long time, and may be one of the reasons worldwide gardening practices have been so different and constantly changing. The USDA and gardeners, professionals, and amateurs like many of us, acknowledge that very real changes are happening in our gardens. One thing for sure, for the contented and successful garden, we have to adapt gardening practices and plants to this new world order to remain consistent with a changing climate.

Accepting climate change can be exciting and an opportunity to try new gardening strategies and plants. What are some of these changes? First, and the most obvious, is that West Central Missouri is enjoying a more temperate growing season. Our weather dynamics are changing so that we now have longer periods of warmer weather, shorter periods of cold weather (these can be intense though), overlapping seasons, longer periods of no rain and rain, more abrupt weather changes, hotter temps perhaps, and in-migration of different plants. It should also be noted that these same conditions (or constraints) might also cause the loss of some plants. I guess as gardeners we can't always have it all our way. And then there is an interesting aside. As conditions change and generate warmer and longer growing seasons it's not only the plants that prosper and expand, so do the bugs. In this new emerging ecosystem there could be more bug varieties: worse varieties, with voracious appetites and terrible manners. Not all bugs are bad bugs and some bugs are the delight for many gardeners: e.g. butterflies, bees. It's the bad bugs that will keep the organic gardeners busier and the other gardener's gardening chemical suppliers happier.

Change introduces change is hardly profound but it is to the point where climate and gardening interact. What's to be done about this; or, how do we make some plants happier and others less so? In this case we do not need a lot of new technology, instead we can rely on a more meticulous implementation and a broader application of those tried and true methods already known, and sometimes practiced by West Central Missouri gardeners. These are: more native plant varieties that have demonstrated they can successively adapt to dynamic and sometimes demanding growing conditions, plant more heat tolerant grasses or even (heaven forbid) reduce the size of the lawn, mulch like crazy to hold ground moisture and heat levels more constant, smart watering systems that nurture plant root systems more than the atmosphere, and plant plants that are kind to certain insects.

To conclude, while current climate changes has made it even more impractical to locally grow purple saxifrage (best grows in the high arctic snows), and some other plant varieties, there is and will be, to many gardener's great delight, a greater opportunity to add an expanding number of plant species and varieties to their gardens, enjoy a longer growing season, and warmer weather.

Happy Gardening